THE KANYOK OF ZAIRE

An Institutional and Ideological History to 1895

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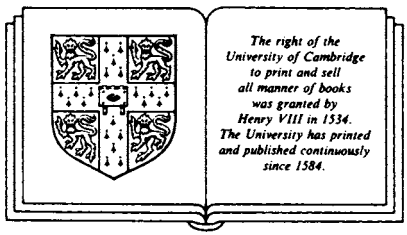

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Failed feasts and deadly dances

According to the accounts of Kanyok storytellers, the two most important tales in their history describe emotions and aspirations, not actions. The one tale chronicles the feelings of Citend, a seventeenth-century Kanyok princess humiliated by the verbal abuse of her companions at the court of the Luba *Mulopwe*. Filled with anger and sorrow, she set off on a lonely journey to the land of her Kanyok grandfather, a man she had never seen, a relative she hoped would welcome her with kindness. Arriving in Kanyok territory, Citend lifted the spirits of the people who rejoiced at the prospect of a true princess in their midst. Expressing deep sentiments of loyalty, the people proclaimed her chief and, for the first time in their history, they felt secure. And for the first time in her life, Citend felt truly content. Everyone's happiness increased even more when Citend invited her people to a feast. The joy was dashed, however, when the feast failed because Citend's ill-timed menstrual cycle prevented her from offering food to her beloved Kanyok children. With sorrow, Citend turned the feast and her chiefdom over to her infant son Shimat, whose name means contentment and security.

The second Kanyok tale describes the bitter anger of Citend's nineteenth-century descendant Ilung a Cibang. Proud at the prospect of becoming Mwen a Kanyok (supreme chief of all the Kanyok), Ilung eagerly journeyed to the Luba Mulopwe's capital where he would perform a ritual dance, the *tomboka*, and then be invested in office by the Luba potentate. Although Ilung came as a chief, he was humiliated by the Luba lord who treated his Kanyok nephew with contempt and treachery. Instead of being invited to dance the tomboka forthwith, Ilung was forced to cut down and burn a living tree, drink huge quantities of palm oil, and prevent any Kanyok feces from touching Luba soil. Only because several of the Mulopwe's Luba subordinates took pity on the abused Kanyok leader was Ilung able to overcome the ordeal and receive permission to dance the tomboka. Even then the Luba ruler's haughty treachery threatened Ilung, for under one of the mats upon which Ilung was to dance the Mulopwe had constructed a deep pit filled with sharp, upright spears. Only a midnight warning from a friendly Luba loiterer alerted Ilung to the danger. Next day, by exposing the trap, the enraged and energized Kanyok leader transformed a dance destined for death into a ceremony of triumph. The ensuing hypocritical praise from the Luba Mulopwe only

intensified Ilung's anger and he promised never again to humiliate himself or his people by returning to the Luba court. Fearing further attempts on his life, he fled Luba territory at once and, reaching the Lubilash River which marks the Luba–Kanyok border, hurled his ceremonial axe into the water, thus severing relations with the Luba empire.

Such fanciful and value-laden tales, the stock of Kanyok oral tradition, may seem perplexing and even useless to scholars trained according to the principles of scientific historical analysis. Constantly reminded to focus on the factual and chronological, historians are told to write what happened, describe what people did, and avoid speculating about thoughts or feelings. Those words of advice learned in graduate school become canons of wisdom passed on to each new generation of practitioners. For African historians, scholars sometimes defensive about the quality of their documentation and constantly frustrated by the limited and murky nature of their data, such cautionary injunctions can become guiding axioms. As a result, African historians frequently avoid the study of ideas and values – topics best left to the more synchronically inclined anthropologists, folklorists, philosophers, or theologians – and focus instead on prosaic events and processes such as migrations, technology, agriculture, politics, or linguistics. Studies of ideas, when they exist, are commonly associated with the more recent past and generally deal with attitudes toward colonialism, the emergence of nationalism, and responses to modernization.

In contrast to works by historians trained in American or European universities and archives, stories of Africa's pre-twentieth-century past, when recounted by Africans themselves, often are cast as intellectual history. African oral historians present intricately patterned collections of myths and legends which are primarily statements about values. Often, scholars trained according to Western standards of historical accuracy attempt to strip away the mythical or legendary husk to discover the factual kernel hidden in the quaintly naive African stories. More recently, however, scholars working with oral accounts have recognized that the "factual kernel" is often a somewhat inconsequential malleable embellishment while the "mythical husk" contains consciously crafted assertions about crucial events or trends in the past.[1] Thus, African myths and legends become the subject of legitimate intellectual history and a portal from which one may view more "factual" events and trends.

Following my Kanyok mentors, men and women of memory who taught me both history and historiography, I believe that African oral traditions,[2] which are in their essence commentaries laden with value statements, provide the basis for a reliable reconstruction of Africa's past. Through careful analysis of myths and legends, Africa's intellectual history can be recovered with great chronological depth and with as much accuracy as the record of topics such as iron, cassava, and wars. The following description of Central Africa's Kanyok people, based on traditional tales of female chiefs losing power after failing to give feasts and of aspiring chiefs boldly dancing on mats concealing deadly traps of upright spears, is not mainly a story of tangible activities such as dinners and dances. Rather, it is an account of thoughts and attitudes, often from as far back in time as the

seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. Furthermore, this story often is a chronicle of ideas and perceptions concerning trends and transformations not directly reported by oral history, much less by written accounts.

The methodology used to write the story of the Kanyok was relatively simple and required more patience and persistence than it did complicated tools of literary or linguistic analysis. The first step in the process was to establish a very general and basic chronology of commonly understood and undisputed events, trends, or structural changes. For the Kanyok, these were the expansion and establishment of Bantu culture in the first millennium of the modern era; the emergence of agriculture, iron-working, and sedentary communities between ca. 500 and ca. 1000; the widespread acceptance of patrilineal political organizations sometime in the second millennium; the introduction of new world crops during the 1600s; the aggressive expansion of the Luba commercial and imperial system in the 1700s; a successful Kanyok political and military campaign to sever ties with the Luba just after 1800; the rapid penetration of Luso-African trade into the very heart of Central Africa during the 1800s; the brief interval in the 1870s when a "Luba" slave trader, Kasongo Cinyama, controlled the Kanyok capital; the restoration of stability under the Kanyok chief and slave trader Kabw Muzemb in the 1880s; the defeat of the Kanyok state by the Congo Free State in 1895; the domination of the Kanyok by a Belgian–Luba coalition (at least from the perspective of the Kanyok) in the twentieth century; and the exploitation of the Kanyok by a Kinshasa–Luba axis after 1960.

The second step in writing Kanyok history was to build a general portrait of Kanyok institutions as they operated in the distant past. Using previous collected linguistic evidence, it is possible to identify the oldest and most widespread titles in the Kasai–Shaba region. Although many of these offices are no longer very important, enough is known about their regalia, functions, and physical location in the chief's village to make broad generalizations about their role in the past. Using lists of villages, geographical markers, and tribute rolls contained in oral histories, it also is possible to reconstruct rough pictures of early chiefdoms in the Kanyok area. Furthermore, by extrapolating from twentieth-century population figures, one can make very broad estimates of the numbers of villages and people joined together in the regional polities into which the Kanyok were organized before the 1700s. Finally, by examining data from the history of neighboring peoples and by using information about current economic practices, it is possible to draw conclusions about how the Kanyok managed their economy and also their tribute or taxation system.

The third step, which constituted the main work of this book, was to uncover and examine ways in which Kanyok myths and legends commented on the activities and institutions which formed the skeleton of their political, social, and economic history. The irony of Central African history is that although the chronicle of events is often sketchy and speculative, the record of opinions about those happenings is rich. The historian's task is to examine oral accounts to discover and decipher the arguments and agreements contained in stories about the past. Thus, writing Kanyok history is a bit like taking a large box of

uncatalogued and undated editorials, attempting to correlate them with a terse record of events or institutions, and trying critically to analyze the issues which are debated, often in a polemical style which tries to conceal as well as to inform.[3]

The myths and legends claiming to describe earliest Kanyok history are collections of clichés and statements of value, rather than factual descriptions of what actually occurred in the past. Nevertheless, because these statements and clichés evaluate events, they also serve to point out the importance and nature of what happened. For example, a common Kanyok cliché describes how a stingy chief was deposed or abdicated after he refused to hold a feast. Because the story is repeated so frequently and in such a stylized fashion, it cannot be accepted as a reliable account of a failure to serve food to the masses. The story does, however, offer evidence that a political transition took place; it is important in much the same way that the American phrase "she threw her hat into the ring" is significant for politicians although it generates no interest among haberdashers. In addition to signaling an event, stories of failed feasts communicate judgments about why a chief or ruling family lost their hold on office. Providing food is a ritual symbolizing the proper functioning of the system in which subjects present tribute to the chief and the chief reciprocates by giving food to his people. Because tribute and reciprocity are at the very heart of the African political process, a cliché accusing the chief of not offering a feast suggests that for some reason the tax, tribute, and gift system had broken down.

Frequently, Central African political clichés are expanded into entire stories. Lengthy accounts of wandering hunter chiefs who seduce the daughters of existing rulers are so common and predictable that they cannot be taken at face value. Such stories, however, contain pointed assertions about the weaknesses of incumbent rulers and systems and about the seductive benefits of innovative challengers. These accounts, therefore, indicate that a political transition occurred and that it has been reported, presumably by the victors, in very favorable terms. While the scholar would be mistaken to examine the tale for clues about migrations or marriages, the mythical or legendary cliché should not be rejected as historically inconsequential.

At times, clichés have been dramatized as political rituals. The widely known tomboka dance, said to have been preceded by a series of prodigious ordeals, was a ritual marking the investiture of Central African chiefs. Whether or how the ritual was actually performed is not so important as the fact that stories describing the ceremony were legend's way of acknowledging the installation of a new leader and of indicating by whose authority the chief was invested. Furthermore, the tone of the tale betrayed the storyteller's attitudes about the relationship between the new client-leader and his patron. While most accounts explained tomboka in a favorable light, Kanyok stories of tomboka ceremonies after 1800 begin to describe the ritual as a form of humiliating punishment inflicted by the Luba on the Kanyok. The historian should not interpret this shift as a change in ceremonial practices so much as the emergence of a new attitude about the Kanyok–Luba relationship. After analyzing this transformation against the background of independently transmitted records describing wars and conflicts

between the Luba and Kanyok in the early nineteenth century, it is clearly evident that the shift in the tone of the tomboka cliché accurately reflected the opinions and even the feelings of Kanyok people almost 200 years ago.

By studying the meaning of clichés, including myths and legends, and by linking changes in political and social views with major turning points in the Kanyok past, it is possible to present an integrated intellectual history of the Kanyok. Furthermore, an understanding of ideas and values is powerful, independent, corroborating evidence of events, trends, and even structural changes which would be perceived dimly, if at all, through the use of conventional tools of analysis. Thus, African intellectual history, the tale of clichés, myths, and legends, is a foundation for examining any aspect of the past. Thus, the analysis of ideas is not just another facet of African history, it is an essential starting point and a stable platform for any exploration of events and institutions which have shaped civilization in Africa. This is what Africans knew all along.